

Excavation, conservation and analysis of a Viking Cemetery at Cumwhitton

9th March 2017

Adam Parsons

Appleby Archaeology welcomed Adam Parsons from Oxford Archaeology North to their March meeting. Adam is an archaeologist who has a special interest in illustrating and making reconstructions of artefacts. His talk, the first of two on the Viking Age Cemetery at Cumwhitton, concentrated on the excavation, conservation and analysis of the site.

In March 2004 a metal detectorist found an unusual object in the plough soil near the village of Cumwhitton in the Eden Valley and reported the find to the Finds Liaison Officer of the Portable Antique Scheme (PAS). The object was thought to be a Viking oval brooch, a rare object usually found in pairs. The detectorist returned to the sight of what was to be identified as Grave 1 and found a second brooch. These are rare finds in England and are associated with female burials. A metal detector survey of a wider area found, as well as many more modern metal objects, a number of small fragments of another brooch and the remains of an early medieval sword hilt. These findings suggested there was at another grave nearby.

The site was under immediate threat from plough damage so PAS commissioned Oxford Archaeology North, funded by English Heritage, to investigate. Stripping back the top soil revealed a further five burials in a tight arrangement, about 10m from the first grave, and all dating to the early tenth century. The graves were numbered 1-6 and all contained grave goods. Viking graves are usually found singly and only one other cemetery site has been identified in England making this a site of great importance.

The soil is very acidic in this area so no human or animal remains survived apart from a small fragment of skull in Grave 1. The many artefacts were in a poor state of preservation so it was decided to proceed using a combination of careful excavation and block lifting (lifting the finds and the soil that contained them). The excavated material was sent to the English Heritage's conservation laboratory in Portsmouth for further careful examination using the latest forensic techniques under controlled laboratory conditions.



In the laboratory the soil blocks were x-rayed to determine their contents and using the X-rays as guides the blocks were carefully excavated and the objects cleaned and conserved. Adam illustrated his talk by showing a number of slides of the X-rays. Some objects were seen on X-ray as shadows with no physical evidence. An example was a needle from a Maplewood sewing box found in Grave1.

Adam continued by describing what was found in each of the graves astounding the audience by the details that had been discovered. Some of the metal objects had traces of organic matter on their surfaces and from these, evidence of their structure could be deduced. Swords preserved detail of the construction of the scabbard showing that they were made of fleece lined wood and covered in leather. A buckle contained seal skin fibres between the two plates suggesting the seal skin may have been from the belt or possibly a garment.



Belt showing seal skin fibres between the plates copyright of 'Oxford Archaeology Ltd'

The grave goods indicate the identity of the person buried. In Graves 1 and 2 the artefacts suggested that they were the graves of women as among other items they each contained antler combs, beads and rings and in Grave1 a Maplewood box containing objects associated with textiles e.g. shears, a spindle whorl and possibly needles. Graves 3-6 are probably the graves of men as they all contained weapons swords, shields and in one an axe and shield boss. It may be that many of the objects buried had a symbolic meaning.

The talk was enthusiastically applauded and the group eagerly awaits Adam's second talk entitled "Reconstruction and Interpretation of the Objects and the Burial Environment".

The next meeting of Appleby Archaeology will be on Thursday April 13th at 7.30pm in the Supper Room Market Hall Appleby.

Phyllis Rouston